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A Solemn Assembly.

John Michael Cline
East Tennessee State University

A SOLEMN ASSEMBLY

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by
John M. Cline
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Mira Gerard, Committee Chair
Anita DeAngelis
Ralph Slatton

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ABSTRACT

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A group of oil paintings completed in partial requirement of my MFA degree is discussed. The paintings are on wood panels and are the result of a combination of old master techniques of under-painting and glazing and more contemporary approaches to the painting process. Each painting represents a particular concept or event from Mormon theology; whereas, the pictorial structure is inspired by Medieval manuscript painting. Thus, this body of work is a synthesis between two worldviews existing centuries apart, yet sharing certain core values and beliefs.

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CHAPTER 1

EXPOSURE

When I walked through the small, dimly lit gallery on the lower floor of Brigham Young University's Museum of Art as a custodian, I did not then realize the importance that the work therein displayed would eventually have in my own painting. It was an exhibition of medieval illuminated manuscripts. While vacuuming and dusting, I would steal minutes peering through the plexi-glass cases at the richly adorned pages with the delicate calligraphic text and bright paintings. The craftsmanship was startling; each book was literally the result of weeks, perhaps months of intense and tedious labor. Yet monasteries and abbeys produced volumes of such copies, all manifesting an approach to art and art-making that would inform and influence a group of oil paintings I would produce five years later.

These paintings were the result of a synthesis between my interest in medieval art, particularly manuscript painting, and my religious beliefs. Being a Mormon, I found a connection between the devotion invested within particular works of art from the Middle Ages and the solemnity with which Mormons approach life and human endeavor.

CHAPTER 2

ORIGINS

The decision of Medieval art as the starting point for this body of twelve oil paintings came about from a desire to combine my religious beliefs with my personal approach to art-making. Medieval art represents a manner of thinking and working that is conducive to my religious beliefs as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As a Mormon, I believe in the integration of truth, beauty, and goodness. All that is true is both good and beautiful; all that claims to be beautiful must therefore possess truth and goodness. And that which is good combines both the beautiful and the true. Also, Medieval artists did not concern themselves with heady intellectual matters. Painting was a craft and painters were craftspeople. This contrasts sharply with attitudes of subsequent periods, especially the 20th Century, when artists became more concerned with theoretical issues and less with craft. Despite my admiration for many modern artists, I do not align myself entirely with that group.

The experience of viewing modern art is a disinterested aesthetic experience. Vernon Hyde Minor, in Art History's History, explains "disinterestedness" as approaching any object with impartiality, with no attempt to discern a function or purpose. True beauty can only be experienced if we look upon art without a search for a "utilitarian motive" (Minor, 95). Although I do not deny the value of disinterestedness as a way of looking at art, there is a subtle, yet vital, difference between this and the experience one was expected to have in front of medieval art.

Although Medieval culture called upon art to serve specific functions, whether to instruct the illiterate or to adorn and beautify chapels and religious objects, it was capable

of inspiring a type of pure aesthetic contemplation. In speaking of Medieval culture and the disinterestedness, Umberto Eco claims that the Medievals had their own unique approach to the aesthetic experience in which "feelings of artistic beauty were converted at the moment of their occurrence into a sense of communion with God and a kind of *joie de vivre*" (Eco, 12). Eco references Abbot Suger's descriptions of the rich adornment of the Abbey Church of St. Denis as proof of a medieval aesthetic pleasure:

> Thus, when—out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God—the loveliness of the many-coloured gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtue: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner (Panofsky, 63,65).

Thus, Medieval art represents a unification of function and pure aesthetic reverie, practicality, and beauty. The unification of beauty and utility is found in ancient Greek philosophy as well and is no doubt the source of these ideas in Medieval art. Aristotle considered the good to be synonymous with the beautiful, and combined they constituted one of the three goals of humankind: the beautiful or good, the pleasurable, and the useful. Augustine dealt with similar issues in <u>De pulchro et apto</u> (De Bruyne, 18-21).

My own art-making process references Medieval practices in several ways. The emphasis on craft over theory is of great significance for me, although theory is not entirely abandoned, nor was it in the Middle Ages. Then, theory was the task of philosophers and theologians. Also, I perceive a true function in my work. This series of work was created with the intention of aiding the viewer in spiritual contemplation. The

capability of art to aid the mind and soul in such contemplation is an authentic and valid function with a long tradition reaching back beyond the Middle Ages.

CHAPTER 3

ONE ETERNAL ROUND

Hagen Haltern, a professor of art at Brigham Young University, first exposed me to the concepts of truth, beauty, and goodness. He was one of many enormously influential teachers at BYU, a private university owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As a Mormon, I was raised with a unique worldview that has greatly influenced the message I try to communicate through the medium of painting.

Mormonism is a Christian denomination that differs from other mainstream Christian sects on several key points of doctrine. For instance, Mormons believe that the Fall of man was in accordance with the will of God rather than a hindrance to His intentions. Secondly, the Mormon afterlife does not consist of one heaven and one hell but of varying degrees of glory. All humankind will be saved into one of these degrees of glory, the lowest of which even exceeds human comprehension in terms of its beauty and magnificence.

The belief that plays a large role in my artwork is the concept of 'eternal progression.' This is the belief that in the next life, humankind can achieve godhood under certain conditions. There is an oft-quoted saying familiar to Mormons that states, "As man is, God once was. As God is, man may become."

Mormonism is a religion with a true eternal perspective. Humankind existed before coming to Earth and will eternally exist afterwards. Even matter has no beginning nor ending. The notion of the creation of the world as creation *ex nihilo* is not to be found in Mormonism. God *organized* the world with pre-existing materials, an idea that all artists should find truly fascinating.

These are the general beliefs of the religion. Very few Mormon artists have dealt with the doctrine of the Mormonism. Many have turned to the history of the faith as their main source of inspiration. This makes perfect sense considering the pervasive practicality of Mormon culture. History lends itself perfectly to realistic, illustrative depiction, the genre of choice by the majority of Mormon artists.

The visual arts have only played a peripheral role in the religious life of Mormons. The church lobbies and hallways may be well-decorated with prints of popular Mormon artwork, but the chapels, the most sacred portion of the church-houses, are, by rule, entirely empty of any images whatsoever. Such a situation may well be the ultimate compromise between iconodules and iconoclasts. However, within the temples, structures more sacred than chapels, images do play a major role in the services.

Despite the inconsistency of images in Mormon worship, the popular culture of Mormonism has opened its arms to the visual work of Mormon artists and embraced it fully. But these popular images are overly sentimental, often portraying Christ tending to gardens or holding small children or animals. Such pictures are extremely marketable and that is probably the main intention in their production. Recently the Church has been adorning official publications with such artwork, a trend which I find disheartening. An "image" is being constructed for the Church by the promulgation of these pictures that I fear will be difficult to undo.

Growing up in this environment most likely helped steer my early artistic interests in the direction of illustration. Also, as I stated before, there is an extremely practical side to the collective Mormon personality. One symbol of the state of Utah, founded and formed by Mormons, is the beehive. This symbol was adopted to inspire in the

population the same work ethic and industry of the honeybee. Thrift, hard work, and self-reliance are all attributes taught by the Church and sought by the members, and fine attributes they are. Culturally, however, this translates into an almost an extreme romanticization of manual labor and winning the daily bread by the sweat of the brow. Or as we move farther away from that way of life, the emphasis is placed on getting a good job (business, engineering, and accounting are the majors of choice at Brigham Young University) often by sacrificing personal dreams and creative ambitions.

Many Mormons are appreciative of art as a hobby but are unsure of it as a profession unless it has a commercial application. However, there is a major difference between the official writings of Church leaders and the cultural realities of Mormonism. In a church periodical Elder Boyd K. Packer, one of the foremost church authorities, stated, "No artist in the Church who desires unselfishly to extend our heritage need sacrifice his career or an avocation, nor need he neglect his gift as only a hobby" (Packer, 64).

Hagen Haltern did not consider art only a hobby, nor would he have declared it a career or avocation. It was larger than all of that. Haltern had written and published his own philosophy of art and willingly shared it in the classroom. The basis of Haltern's philosophy comes from the Bible, in the Book of Exodus, Chapter 31, verses one through three. In these passages, the Lord is speaking to Moses of a man named Bezaleel who has been ordained and granted the gifts necessary to design the tabernacle of the children of Israel. The important passage, verse three, reads as follows: "And I [the Lord] have filled him [Bezaleel] with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship,...." (Haltern, 72). From this verse,

Haltern believed he had found a specific example, provided by God, of the way humanity is expected to approach art.

Bezaleel was filled with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and workmanship. Haltern likens these five concepts respectively to five levels of meaning that are provided for by the Hebrew language: the anagogical level, the allegorical or archetypal level, the legal level, the literal level, and the practical level. A truly successful work of art will function on all levels.

The first level, the anagogical, is identical with the experience Abbot Suger described and that is quoted above at the end of Part One. Haltern correlates this level with the Spirit of God mentioned in the Exodus verse and that "reveals to us the transcendent beauty of celestial conditions. We experience heaven on earth—we see with the Father's eyes" (Haltern, 72).

The second level, the allegorical or archetypal level, or *wisdom,* teaches us by means of the myths, sagas, etc.. and the archetypes and allegories which are contained therein. The legal level, or *understanding*, deals with "verbal languages, logical reasoning, and the entire world of the sciences and the many and helpful laws that they make conscious to us." The literal level, or *knowledge,* contains facts, which are discerned by comparing and contrasting. And finally, the practical level includes workmanship, craftsmanship, persistence, etc.. (Haltern, 72).

Haltern's theories demonstrate well the mixing of art and religion that occurs at Brigham Young University. The medieval artist and Benedictine monk Theophilus also used the concept of spiritual gifts in his writings on art. Addressing his "most beloved son" in his treatise <u>On Divers Arts,</u> he states that any attainment of knowledge in the arts

is bestowed by the grace of the seven-fold Spirit. Theophilus then lists and comments on the seven gifts: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and the fear of the Lord (Theophilus, 78,79). It is interesting to note the overlap; both Haltern's and Theophilus' writings include "knowledge," "wisdom," and "understanding."

CHAPTER 4

THE PROGRAM

One of my primary concerns in the creation of this work was to produce a consistent group of paintings unified around a single theme or narrative. The size of each panel, the total number, and the style were all important factors that required much deliberation. My artistic thought process has always lent itself to serial work, but never to the extent that this concept required.

These twelve paintings were designed around the theme of *Lamentations.* Within the Book of Mormon, one of the several books that Mormons accept as scripture, I found several passages that partly inspired this theme. The Book of Mormon is a historical record, believed to be factual by Mormons, dealing with the ancient inhabitants of the Western hemisphere. The story tells of a family that leaves Jerusalem and travels by boat to a promised land. There the family splits into two groups that eventually become great nations. The Nephites continue to practice the Mosaic law as passed down by their fathers; the Lamanites turn away from their traditions and repeatedly engage the Nephites in warfare eventually resulting in the annihilation of the Nephite nation.

Basically, the Book of Mormon is, among many other things, a record of genocidal warfare. Considering the state of affairs in the world today, much of it is profoundly relevant even outside the Christian context. In addition to this, there are several profoundly sorrowful passages of lamentation:

> And it came to pass that there were ten more who did fall by the sword, with their ten thousand each; yea, even all my people, save it were those twenty and four who had escaped into the south countries, and a few who had deserted over unto the Lamanites, had fallen; and their flesh, and bones, and blood lay upon the face of the earth, being left by the hands of

> those who slew them to molder upon the land, and to crumble and to return to their mother earth.
>
> And my soul was rent with anguish, because of the slain of my people, and I cried: O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord…
>
> Behold, if ye had not done this, ye would not have fallen. But behold, ye are fallen, and I mourn your loss.
>
> O ye fair sons and daughters, ye fathers and mothers, ye husbands and wives, ye fair ones, how is it that ye could have fallen!
>
> But behold ye are gone, and my sorrows cannot bring your return (Book of Mormon, 479).

From this starting point, I scoured the Book of Mormon and the Bible, especially the Book of Job, for other passages. With these as inspiration, I drew from Mormon theology a program that illustrates the lamentable road of humankind from the pre-earth realm to death. It is not consistent with Mormon beliefs or cultural sensibilities to dwell upon the negative aspects of existence. Yet in response to the trials and insecurities forced upon us within the last several years, I felt compelled to do so.

James Snyder, in his book , Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4th-14th Century, speaks of the concept of an underlying theme connecting several individual works. He calls such structures a "program" that he defines as a "set, a cycle, or a sequence of related themes or stories selected and arranged in proximity to each other that presented a larger, more comprehensive plan to the subject matter, a central theme governing it all" (Snyder, 19).

The program of my paintings begins with the Mormon "pre-existence" and charts two courses simultaneously through historical time and the "time" of the soul of an individual. This manner of speaking about two things at once can be found in the

prophetic writings of Isaiah, the parables of Jesus Christ, and even within the motifs adorning early Christian catacombs and sarcophagi (Synder, 19). Following the scenes representing the pre-existence in the first two panels, the third panel begins the story of mortal existence with the Fall of man. The following three panels, Panels Four through Six, represent conditions of mortality, such as death (Figure 1), isolation (Figure 2), etc,..

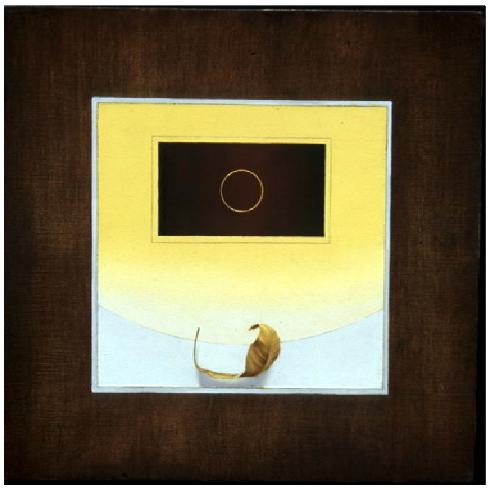

Figure 1. Lamentation No. 5

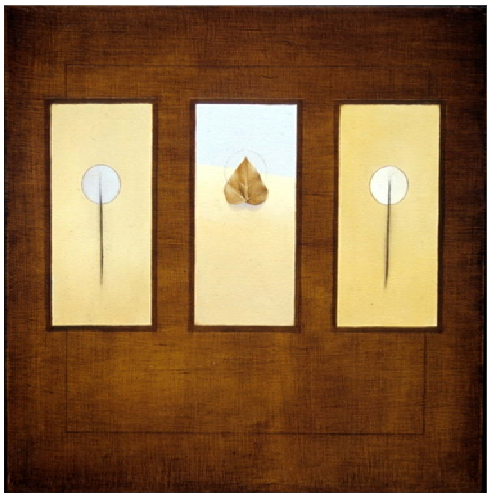

Figure 2. Lamentation No. 6

Panels Seven and Eight continue the narrative by dealing with the events surrounding the death of Christ and should be interpreted as referring to both to the actual events as they occurred in the past and the events as metaphors for situations we can often find ourselves in as mortal humans. The final four panels represent a complete loss of conscience and the ensuing warfare and destruction.

When hanging together in an intimate space, the twelve paintings do not depress, despite the melancholy subject matter. Instead, they provide a catharsis for the viewer. The mood of the gallery space is transformed in such a manner that the lamentations represented are swallowed up and nullified in the quiet, peaceful atmosphere. The

gallery, then, becomes a space for the sorrowful, or for those who understand the depths of sorrow, to retreat to for rest. Zephaniah, Chapter 3, verse 18 says, “I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly.” From this verse I borrowed the term “solemn assembly” as the title for this group of paintings.

CHAPTER 5

SYMBOLISM

The program that unifies the solemn assembly clothes itself in the language of symbol. I selected leaves and twigs as symbols of humankind because such objects served to remind me of the Mormon perspective of the human condition. Leaves and twigs, removed from their life source and decaying on the forest floor, represent the religious concept of the fall of humankind and the subsequent physical and spiritual change that overtook the bodies of Adam and Eve. Once so full of life, youth, and innocence, Adam and Eve were cut off from their life and light source. Sickness, pain, death, and sorrow were brought into the world.

My use of leaves and twigs as symbols of the spiritual condition of humankind is related to the Medieval proclivity to view nature and that which is known by use of the senses as symbols of the divine. Max Dvorak speaks to this extensively in his book, Idealism and Naturalism in Gothic Art. He states that the philosophical problems involving the relationship between the world as perceived by the senses and transcendental ideas formed the key to the entire medieval world order (Dvorak, 20). There were two realms of existence, one understood by the senses and prone to human fallacy and another higher realm perceived through the faculties of the mind, reason, faith, or spiritual intuition. This, of course, hearkens back to Platonism, that was transmitted to medieval thinkers by Pseudo-Dionysius through translations of the writings of Plotinus by Hilduin and Scotus Erigena (De Bruyne, 7).

Eco devotes an entire chapter on symbol and allegory in his book on medieval aesthetics:

> The Medievals inhabited a world filled with references, reminders, and overtones of Divinity, manifestations of God in things. Nature spoke to them heraldically: lions or nut-trees were more than they seemed; griffins were just as real as lions because, like them, they were signs of a higher truth (Eco, 53).

Eco calls this *universal symbolism.* There is also a *metaphysical symbolism*, common in medieval thinking as well. This entails "discerning the hand of God in the beauty of the world" (Eco, 56). A fine example of metaphysical symbolism is contained in the "Book of Alma" within The Book of Mormon. It reads, "…yea, all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular forms do witness that there is a Supreme Creator" (Book of Mormon, 283). Thus, both Mormonism and medieval art provided a philosophical justification for the use of symbols within my paintings.

As a specific example of how symbolism is used in my work, I refer to Panels Seven and Eight (Figures 3 and 4) that represent the betrayal of Christ to the authorities by Lucifer in exchange for thirty pieces of silver and the crucifixion, respectively. The thirty incised spheres on the surface of the panel represent not actual coins but the idea of coins. This both suggests the actual story, while at the same time withdrawing from it and allowing the painting to exist as a metaphor for the common human act of giving up

that which is good and lasting in exchange for something which offers perhaps a greater, yet transient, pleasure.

In Panel Eight, I adopted symbols used in crucifixion illustrations in Medieval manuscript painting. The sun and the moon are incised and gilded to show the mourning of the heavens over the death of the Son of God.

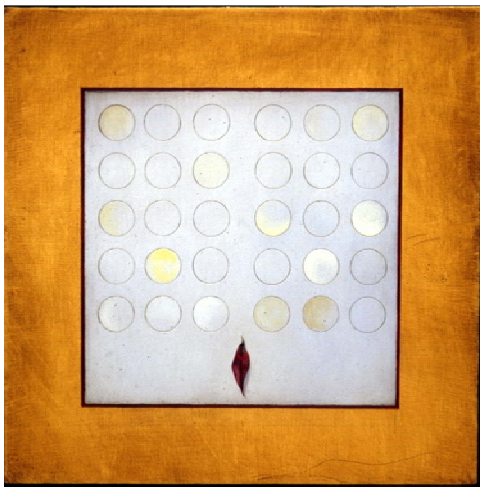

Figure 3. Lamentation No. 7

Figure 4. Lamentation No. 8

CHAPTER 6

ILLUMINATION

Light and Color

Along with symbolism, illumination was an extremely important concept in the Middle Ages and is also important in my work. The word "illuminate" means to give brilliancy to, or to enlighten. In one sense, we speak of illumination figuratively, as in the "illumination" of the mind, or in other words, the shedding of light on an idea or philosophical concept. Symbolism aids this sort of illumination. But there is also the actual shedding of physical light on a scene, a room, an object, etc,…My paintings deal with the idea of illumination in both senses of the word.

As far as the latter sense is concerned, the physical properties of oil paint are such that by careful manipulation of the consistency of the paint, the artist can control the quality of light that is reflected from the surface of the painting. I use this to my advantage. Each panel is first stained with oil paint by scrubbing thin layers of a particular pigment over the entire surface, creating a paint skin composed of several layers of translucent paint. Light penetrates through the paint and weakens as each layer absorbs more and more of the wavelengths. Finally, the light strikes off the white ground of the panel and travels back out through the layers. The result is a soft, internally glowing affect.

When used in juxtaposition with more opaque paint application, extraordinarily luminous affects can be achieved. The translucent layers, absorbing the light as it travels through, acts as a foil to the opaque areas that reflect high levels of light directly off the

paint surface. The combination in one painting of areas that absorb light and areas that directly reflect it creates the illusion of the painting as a light source. When placed properly under good gallery lighting, the affect is magnified.

The glazing techniques of the old masters such as Vermeer and Titian created the same luminous quality. In the painting of the actual leaves and twigs, I mimic their processes by first painting a grisaille under-painting of the object. Using Titanium White and Raw Umber, I mix a variety of grays from a mid-tone to white. After painting the object using these values, I proceed by laying a single glaze of the appropriate local color. Following this is several steps of glazing in the dark areas and opaque painting in the lighter areas. The amount of illusion I achieve is the direct result of this process of painting.

Not considering the leaves and twigs, the paintings are brightly colored. Bright colors, used skillfully, have always delighted me on a deep level. I use bright colors in these paintings primarily because of my innate love for such. However, there are other purposes. For instance, various religions use color for symbolic ends. In the Middle Ages, theories of color were tied up with theories of light, being the vehicle of color.

The Medieval conception of beauty is inseparably connected to ideas of proportional harmony. However, Eco points out that Medieval society did not attach such mathematical requirements in their aesthetics of light (being the vehicle of color) and color. The love of color was not a quantitatively derived; rather, it was based on a qualitative aesthetic, a love of color pure and simple. Thus, chiaroscuro, sfumata, and other Renaissance devices are practically non-existent in Medieval art (Eco, 43,44).

By making use of the light-manipulating qualities inherent in oil painting, combined with bright pure hues, my painting manifests a Medieval mentality. The simple hues of the color wheel, with little to no modification, combine to provide spiritually dense, geometric backdrops upon which I paint the leaves and twigs, with all the subtlety of color that nature provides. The tension which arises from this odd combination of opposing color and compositional schemes further stresses the spiritual ideas of Mormonism.

Manuscript Painting

I began this paper referring to illumination in another sense of the word: manuscript illumination. The painting of manuscripts is not unique to Medieval Europe. There are extant Classical manuscripts and also examples of Islamic manuscripts. Yet Medieval painted manuscripts offer some of the most memorable examples of the ancient art, such as the Book of Kells or the Lindisfarne Gospels.

I cannot remember now exactly which manuscripts I viewed at BYU, yet on some subconscious or mystical level, the experience of viewing these manuscript paintings remained deep within me, to resurface when all conditions were present that would guarantee a positive reception. The form of manuscript painting is the form I employ for the execution of my ideas.

As an example, the Portrait and Symbol of St. Matthew, from the Lindisfarne Gospels, is a visual summary of the elements I borrow from manuscript painting in the production of my own work: bright, pure colors and symbolic motifs, both which I have

already addressed, and ornamental framework painted around the main narrative or action of the scene.

St. Matthew is shown recording his gospel account in a book. Behind a curtain appears a bearded man, perhaps Christ, and above Matthew is the evangelist symbol that almost always accompanies representations of Matthew in medieval art: the winged man. All are painted in bright pure colors often employed by medieval artists since, as I have stated before, the aesthetics of color were tied tightly to concepts of luminosity, a symbol and a representation of the Divine (Eco, 46,47).

Symbolic motifs, such as the halos and the winged man are not unique to medieval culture. Halos, for instance, persisted into the Renaissance and even into the Baroque: Caravaggio's The Calling of St. Matthew is a good example. I use the halo in my own painting to make reference to this common Christian symbol, but I use it in a purely Mormon sense. Considering the Mormon belief in the divine potential of humankind, saints and other divine personalities are not the only figures deserving of a halo, so is the common woman or man.

Unlike color and symbol, the ornamental framework in manuscript painting was simply that: ornamental. It served no apparent symbolic importance nor added to any particular narrative or doctrinal explication. I use this device in the same manner. It encloses the forms and symbols that I see necessary to employ and imposes an order and proportional harmony over the entire composition. Also, the geometry of such a compositional structure adds a sense of gravity to the work that I seriously doubt I can achieve using more organic forms.

Although the text which inspired my paintings were ultimately left out of both the presentation and the pictures, the essential nature of the text in Medieval manuscripts specifically, and in Medieval art in general, was a determining factor in my decision to employ Medieval models as my source of inspiration. The exhibition of BYU was curated in such as way as to draw attention to the inter-dependant relationship between image and text. Without the text that inspired me, the images would not have been born.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY

It may seem an unlikely mix, Mormonism and Medievalism, yet one that ultimately makes perfect sense, as I have hopefully proven with the exhibition of paintings and this accompanying paper. In the middle ground between these two worldviews is found an abiding solemnity and discipline. Both require this, for they both look toward a higher life-conception and meaning, above the sometime base and carnal point of view that we all inherit naturally as a result of birth.

There is an anecdote recounted by the Anglo-Norman monk Orderic Vitalis and printed in C.R. Dodwell's survey titled The Pictorial Arts of the West: 800-1200. The story tells of a monk who had committed all imaginable sins against the Monastic Rule. Being a devoted scribe, however, he set about completing a volume of the Divine Law. Upon his death, he found himself standing before the judgment seat with all of his sins and errors being carefully weighed against him by demons intent on claiming his soul. However, holy angels showed the monk's copy of the Divine Law as evidence in his favor. The letters he had copied in the book were carefully weighed one by one against the sins he had committed in life. At the end, there was one letter in excess and thus the monk was granted time to return to earth and prove himself worthy of heavenly rest (Dodwell, 42).

I approach my own painting with the urgency and soberness that such a story implies is necessary. I believe artists are given a charge to delve deeply into human existence and lure from that often obscure abyss profound truths that enrich life and teach us about ourselves. This one purpose of art has remained constant despite the multitude

of changes that have occurred in humankind's approach to art from culture to culture and decade to decade.

These paintings represent a seminal step in my own personal artistic path. Medieval art and Mormonism are both deep wells from which I can pull much inspiration and instruction for future projects.

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VITA

JOHN M.CLINE

PERSONAL DATA:	Date of Birth: August 12, 1975 Place of Birth: Cumberland, MD Marital Status: Married
EDUCATION:	BFA, Frostburg State University Brigham Young University MFA, East Tennessee State University
PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:	Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, College of Arts and Sciences, 2003-2005 Custom Framer, Johnson City Custom Framing, Johnson City, TN, 2002-2005
SELECTED EXHIBITIONS:	Philip Dressler Center for the Arts, 14th Annual 2001 Juried Art Competition 26th Annual First Tennessee Bank Art Competition and Exhibition, 2004 2nd Prize